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From the *New York Times*
to the State Department.

Rick Burt Steps Down

The *New York Times* seems well on its way to becoming a fully accredited prep school for the State Department. Four years ago, Leslie Gelb quit his job as *Times* national security correspondent to become Cyrus Vance's assistant secretary for politico-military affairs. Last month the man who replaced Gelb at the *Times*, Richard Burt, also took off for officialdom—a spot on Alexander Haig's transition team, preliminary to getting Gelb's former State Department post as well.

Gelb and Burt are two very different men, in manner and ideology, but both represent something new in American journalism—a deliberate experiment by the *Times* Washington bureau to hire academic or ex-government specialists to cover national security affairs. Gelb had been in the Pentagon's international security affairs office in the 1960s and, later, at the Brookings Institution. Before going to the *Times*, Burt was assistant director of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, and a regular player on the Atlantic Community's international establishment seminar circuit.

The idea that reporters should know something about the topic they cover certainly has its appeal. It means, in defense reporting, that readers get someone who knows what "equivalent megatonnage" means, who can deal with the natty jargon of modern strategy without bowling over in confusion or leaping joyfully like an infant approaching a new toy. But there are drawbacks as well. Few who descend into the dark pit of strategic studies emerge without a very distinct set of convictions. In Burt's case particularly, this phenomenon colored the way the defense world was covered in America's most important newspaper.

Burt came to the *Times* as a devotee of the "fairly rational hawk" faction in the defense debate, and that's the view that *Times* readers saw. Not much to the left

of that position entered the paper during the past few years. John Finney, who had a somewhat skeptical attitude on strategic matters, abandoned reporting to become news editor. The other regular on the security beat has been the gentlemanly but quite hawkish Drew Middleton.

Burt got some decent scoops in his short *Times* career, and occasionally banged out a balanced news analysis. But in the main, Burt's own views tended to dominate his articles, even in straightforward, ostensibly objective news stories. This tendency showed up dramatically in leaked stories given to Burt in the early days of the SALT II negotiations. Nearly every compromise reached during the talks was presented on page one of the *Times* as a US concession. Only those readers who made it through the last quarter of the articles learned of concessions that the Soviets had made in the same round. Similarly, when, on June 16, 1978, Burt reported that senior foreign and defense policy officials were pushing the White House to make sure SALT doesn't prohibit mobile missiles (such as the MX), it was only because Burt himself was also concerned. Never did Burt serve as conduit for those pushing positions from the other side of the spectrum.

On March 21, 1979, Burt wrote about how the loss of the Tacksman radar site in Iran might affect verification of the SALT II treaty. A gloomy picture was painted. Contrary evidence—that ex-CIA deputy director Herbert Scoville Jr. had argued in a briefing that these radars were not needed to verify the provisions of SALT II; that other radars in the Aleutians and the Pacific, as well as satellites and other means of monitoring, could do the trick—appeared in paragraph 21. Senator Henry Jackson was warning of "irreparable harm" as early as paragraph eight.

By contrast, in a piece about Soviet civil defense, Burt's lead sentence—"The CIA says that Soviet civil defense preparations are unlikely to blunt the ability of the United States to retaliate in the event of nuclear war"—was followed immediately, in the same paragraph, by the caveat: "This assessment appears to differ somewhat from the views of military people in the Defense Department."

The structure of Burt's stories will keep semioticians enthralled for years to come. Take the lead from

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